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by RICHARD HUDNUT
OF CANADA

WHAT IS WRONG WITH OUR SAFETY TRAFFIC WORK?

IT WOULD greatly help us to think clearly about our subject if we would realize that fundamentally the prevention of traffic accidents is a public health problem.

While great strides have been made in preventing premature fatality and unnecessary suffering from disease, the accident toll has risen until now it is a major cause of death. Recently, a life insurance company paid out in automobile accident death claims, twice as much as for diabetes and six times the sum paid for maternal deaths. Motor vehicles caused more deaths than the combined rate for measles, whooping-cough, typhoid and scarlet fever. One does not need to be an expert logician to realize that there is no profit in saving our children from diphtheria to have them crippled on the streets; or to prolong the usefulness of the lives of diabetics if they are going to be killed horribly on the highway.

Canada's most valuable possession is a healthy citizenship. Our chief line of defence in the fight against death and sickness is our health departments and our doctors, dentists and nurses. This army is composed of highly trained personnel, using knowledge which has been painstakingly accumulated from every relevant source. Now the Greeks had a word for this, which we have adopted into our technical vocabulary under the term "epidemiology" which means knowledge of the contributing and causative factors. Let us take typhoid as an easily understood example. Medical science is not content with merely treating people. Our public health authorities know the epidemiology of typhoid. They know the various circumstances or combination of factors which cause the trouble, thus, they are able to do two things, to correct conditions at the source, and at the same time teach people preventive measures.

IF WE examine our problem of the human factor in relation to traffic accidents by means of the technique of Public Health, we are at once confronted with a serious deficiency. At present, we have not sufficient knowledge of the variations of behavior which contribute to accident causes. We cannot correct the faults of the individual or warn other people unless we have data. Our first task is to build up the epidemiology of accidents. Statistics on traffic accidents are compiled, but in their present form they are not very valuable as a basis for scientific investigation. Primarily, the data are collected to determine liability for infraction of law, or as a basis for suit for damages. It is not suggested that this point of view should be abandoned, but it should be supplemented. For instance, it is conceivable that a person's mental reactions might be logically ordered, but in actual practice, too slow to prevent an accident; or one might think fast enough but be handicapped in what one wanted to do by such a simple matter as a painful rheumatic shoulder. Pre-supposing reasonable co-operation on the part of the driver under examination, and a tactful interviewer trained in the art of skilful questioning, such supplementary examination might, in numerous cases, uncover clues which at present are never disclosed.

If we are to get to the bottom of the human actions which cause accidents, it is not sufficient to state that a driver accidentally hit a man at dusk, or travelled too far over on the wrong side of the right of way, or that he misjudged a situation at an intersection. We must get a clinical picture of his physical condition and his mental processes.

IN OUR previous article we noted the very large number of people killed and injured by automobiles in Ontario during a six-year period. This is by no means the total of all accidents, because fortunately there are many accidents in which no one is hurt. An examination of one annual report indicates that in 9,645 reported cases, 476 resulted in 512 fatalities, and 6,763 accidents caused injury to 8,990 persons. This leaves over 2,400 cases from which, but for the Grace of God, death or injury might have resulted. These should be counted as part of our problem, because there is no reason to suppose that the actions of the drivers in the second group differed greatly from those that caused injury or death.

This article entitled

THE ROAD TO SOLUTION

is the second written

By N. L. BURNETTE

in the discussion of greater safety on our Canadian Highways

Those entrusted with the task of investigating accidents; those whose duty it is to determine responsibility; and those who are interested in settling claims for personal and property damage, would greatly aid toward an understanding of the human factors that cause accidents, if they would try and find out exactly how the driver thought he reacted when confronted with the emergency. Furthermore, the situation is so grave and the number of drivers involved so large, that it would be both desirable and practical to submit a sampling of all cases to technical examination by experts.

Science has made available the means of detecting defects in judgment, dexterity, co-ordination, vision and hearing. Because of this it is possible under laboratory conditions to measure the basic skills that comprise driving ability. Some interesting experimental devices have been worked out at the Harvard Bureau of Street Traffic Research. Doctor Harry De Silva writing of his impressions of testing people at the National Automobile Show in New York City states that "We have had as subjects a number of highly emotional individuals who almost lost control of themselves while being examined under the unexciting conditions of the laboratory". It can be imagined what a danger such persons would be in real traffic. Doctor De Silva also mentioned a driver who informed him that he had a tendency to "freeze up" so that he could not move when he found himself in a tight place. Those who had an opportunity of observing war neuroses will recognize this condition: as a matter of fact it is an old, and in varying degree, common reaction. It has become part of our language through the phrase "rooted to the ground in fear". The Harvard machinery measures a number of different points: quickness of braking response, ability to attend calmly to several things at once, eye-hand co-ordination, emotional sensibility, vigilance, speed and position estimation, and reaction to glare. Equipment, and the trained personnel to operate it, costs money, but the outlay would be nothing as compared with the present annual cost of property damage, to say nothing of the cost of personal injury and death.

IN VIEW of our present state of knowledge of behavior, it is not suggested that dogmatic statements could be made about the cause of every accident attributed to a driver's actions. From the sources noted, it would be possible to build up an epidemiology from which, with all due caution, inferences could be drawn, and preventive measures taught. Public Health does not teach that everyone who drinks unpasteurized milk will contract typhoid or diphtheria or scarlet fever or septic sore throat or bovine tuberculosis. From the information accumulated, public health authorities do know that there is the constant danger of such disabling conditions if we use unsafe milk, and they warn us accordingly. So with accident causes. If a study disclosed evidence that there is a cause and effect relationship between unsafe driving and certain physical characteristics, mental attributes, or unwise habits, we would know what to advise people for their own good. The supposition is that these things do contribute to accidents. In addition, there are probably numerous people handicapped in greater or lesser degree who, through luck, have not contributed to an accident but who may become involved in one at any moment.

We could profitably borrow another technique from Public Health. Data obtained from investigation after accidents occur, could be supplemented by experimental work with people before they were actually exposed to accident conditions. Using the measuring devices made possible through a combination of medical and psychological knowledge, and engineering skill, we could test the ability of large numbers of potential drivers. The logical place for this is in the final years in our secondary schools. In the United States some high schools are already demanding that the student pass a driving test before he is given a graduation diploma. This is a pretty forward-looking vision, recognizing that we live in a mechanized world. It probably discloses an occasional case of a person who should not be allowed to drive at all. It certainly provides an opportunity to inculcate good driving habits from the beginning. If the School Medical Officer is part of the scheme, there is a

(*Continued on page 114*)

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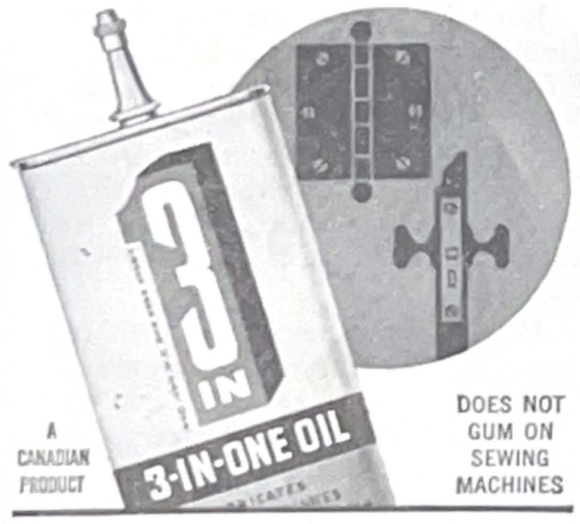

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OUR TRAFFIC SAFETY WORK

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 100]

chance to warn the student about physical defects, if any, and suggest corrective measures. It has the added advantage of giving to a group a uniform measure of instruction as opposed to the haphazard system whereby a thousand beginners are taught to drive by a thousand different relatives or friends and then are examined for license by a hundred different officials possessing varying degrees of intelligence as well as purely personal ideas of what constitutes proficiency.

IT IS not within this author's province to suggest additions or amendments to our educational curricula. The American idea is quoted merely to point out that one or two large high schools strategically located would provide part of the material from which our scientific investigation could be made.

Having obtained our data, could we turn it to practical use? The answer is decidedly yes, but qualified with the caution that we must not be too impatient for results. In "Mr. Standfast" by John Buchan, a character is made to say "We are still in the intelligence stage of the affair, the time hasn't yet come for a plan of campaign". It is a pertinent quotation. We are alive to the seriousness of the situation. We must not let ourselves grow either callous or discouraged. Let us be honest and admit the cause of our failure. We have tried to tackle what is essentially a scientific problem, without any approach that bears the slightest resemblance to the scientific method.

Once we have experimentally established causes, and tested methods of control, the road ahead will become clearer. For one thing we will remove the admonitory figure of the policeman from our safety teaching and replace it with the symbol of the physician and the educator. We no longer throw a raving maniac into jail. We remove him to hospital. He is either cured and returned to society, or else society is permanently protected against the harm that he might do. So with the driver who is a menace through no fault of his own. He has no criminal intent, he is not even careless in the real sense of the word. His case is not one for the police. It can only be studied, and reported on by those trained in the inter-related sciences that throw light on human behavior.

One can look further ahead. If we eventually arrive at an understanding of the underlying factors involved in accidents, our citizens' safety leagues will fulfil a more useful function under scientific leadership. They will occupy a position similar to that of the voluntary health agencies in relation to Public Health. They will know what teaching to convey to the public. This might well start as a drive for a rational system of initial instruction and licensing, and periodic re-examination of a scientific character when the individual himself, suspects impairment of his abilities.

Commenting on the figures for the year 1934, the medical statistician of the Ontario Health Department wrote "At the moment there is no reason why we may expect the present situation to become less acute in the next few years. Rather, unless something is immediately done about it we may expect this appalling destruction of human life to continue". Unfortunately, the prophecy proved only too accurate.

The facts demand action. Science can no longer stand diffidently on the sidelines. Safety education in Canada can no longer proceed without its help.

SCREEN REVIEW

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 111]

film is no great shakes, but it is an up-to-the-average Crosby opus, which means that it is pleasant and entertaining, particularly if you like to hear the inimitable Bing crooning Hawaiian tunes that were never heard in Hawaii.

"QUALITY STREET"

SIR JAMES M. BARRIE'S fantasy seems now a little quaint, but if you are in an old-fashioned mood you will probably enjoy it. It is a faithful transcription of the text and mood of the original play, and, while we are generally approving of such faithfulness which is not too common on the screen, this is one occasion when we would not have protested too much if the adapters had taken a few liberties. Katharine Hepburn and Franchot Tone are the featured players.

"LOVE IS NEWS"

THIS is a light and lively yarn of newspaperdom that is highly enjoyable. The plot is the well-worn one of the newspaper reporter and the heiress and we didn't think that they'd ever be able to do anything else with it, but they have. Tyrone Power, Jr. and Loretta Young romp through the film with pleasure to themselves as well as to the audience.

"PERSONAL PROPERTY"

BASED on the farce, "The Man in Possession", this bit of foolery is chiefly important for the fact that it presents for the edification of film fans two of the screen's brightest heart-breakers, Jean Harlow and Robert Taylor. Miss Harlow is a lady of no mean comic talent when the comedy is broad and slightly loud, and she has an excellent opportunity here as the penniless widow on the hunt for a wealthy husband. Robert Taylor is less happily cast, comedy not being his particular field. But the film has Reginald Owen, who can always be relied upon to tickle the risibilities.

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FILM GUIDE

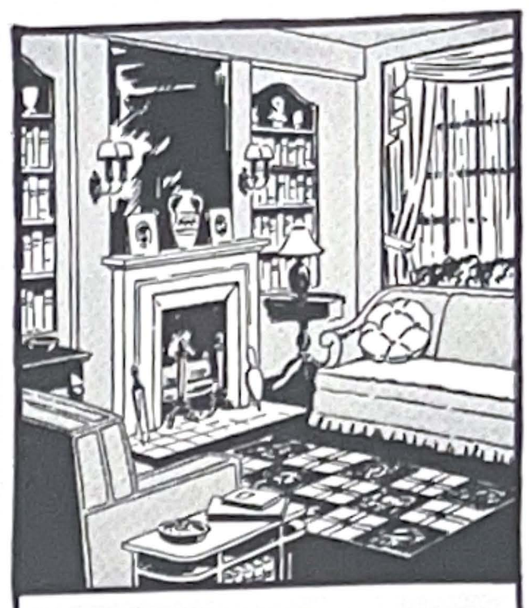
"The Good Earth"—Probably the film of the year. A magnificent spectacle and a moving human story. Luise Rainer is superb.

"The Plough and the Stars"—A brilliant play, brilliantly screened.

"The Garden of Allah"—Well, it's in technicolor, if that's something.

"Camille" — Robert Taylor loves Greta Garbo.

"Fire Over England"—A stirring historical romance.



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